Roy Hay

Worth the extra pound or two

Propagation is of prime importance in amateur gardening and even more so in commercial horticulture. In a public park or a nursery a skilled propagator has always and rightly received a higher rate of pay than his less knowledgeable colleagues. This is a point to remember when employing a gardener: if he really understands propagation he is worth an extra pound or two a week. He will save that much by propagating plants from cuttings, layers, divisions and seed, and, because a skilled propagator must understand the management of greenhouses and frames, this is an added bonus for the employer.

Until a few years ago this skill was something of a mystique: in many ways it still is, not because of this "green thumb" nonsense but because a skilled propagator has to learn by experience exactly the right moment to take his cuttings—and this can vary enormously with all the hundreds of different types of plant we grow in our gardens. With some shrubs, if you take the young growth as a cutting a week or so too early in July, when it is too soft, it will rot. Take it a week or so too late, it may or may not root, but it will probably take a couple of months to do so. Take it at the right moment and it will probably root in about a fortnight. This is certainly true of one of my favourite plants, the dwarf very floriferous golden Genista lydia, but it applies to many other plants.

In recent years we have seen many invaluable aids to propagation. Electrical soil warming has replaced the old "hot beds" which our fathers had to make laboriously over heaps of still fermenting hot manure heaps. Modern glass or plastic propagating cases, electrically heated, have superseded the old bell glass. This in some ways is a pity because the bell glass, which originated in France, has disappeared, though a few still exist no doubt in old gardens and these will soon be collectors' items. There was an attempt some years ago to market a fibreglass bell glass and it was certainly a very useful piece of equipment for rooting semi-woody cuttings. The bell glass, whether of real glass or semi-opaque glass fibre, has the advantage that it can be set snugly on the ground and keep a really humid atmosphere inside it. If ventilation should be necessary, one just cocks it to one side and props it up with a large stone. It may be suggested that the same conditions can be obtained under a cloche, but only if one uses a plastic type which retains high humidity, for there is too much ventilation from a glass cloche.

Another aid has been the introduction of so-called "hormone" rooting compounds that stimulate root growth, followed as an added refinement by a combination of the rooting powder and a fungicide such as captan to protect the base of the cutting from decay.

But the greatest aid of all has been mist propagation. When you take a cutting and place it in a rooting medium—compost, peat and sand, vermiculite or whatever—it will wilt and has to be shaded. Thus it is a race between the successful production of roots and the death of the cutting. But by ensuring that the cutting is always automatically kept covered by a film of moisture the cutting does not transpire moisture and wilt, and it may be given full sunlight.

Mist allows us to root many cuttings more quickly than by the old methods and it also permits the propagation of plants by cuttings that was impossible by other methods. But it must be stressed that these are only aids: they cannot replace the knowledge that a propagator must acquire—the type of cutting to use, the exact time to take it and how best to prepare it.

One of the great advantages of mist propagation is that with some plants, notably heathers, one can root successively quite large cuttings and it is possible to produce a plant of salable size in 12 months. Recently a friend was given a dozen large pieces of the true Scottish white heather; they were about six inches high with a head of several stems and mostly in full flower. He asked me to put them on our mist bench and though I was a little doubtful about rooting them, they all made a copious root system in about 20 days.

Propagation is a fascinating business. To see tiny young plants grow from the base of an African violet leaf or from slits made across the main veins of a leaf of Begonia rex always makes me marvel at nature's ingenuity.

Indeed, there is so much to learn and so much new information is coming to hand that the International Plant Propagators' Society was formed in the United States in 1951. Now it is planned to form a British chapter of the I.P.P.S. and this is to be proposed at a plant propagation conference to be held at the Gardening Centre, Syon Park, Brentford, on Wednesday, September 18. Admission to the centre is 5s., but admission to the conference is free. Membership will be confined to those engaged in propagating plants for commercial purposes and those engaged in teaching or research in plant propagation not directly or indirectly commercial. Further particulars from Mr. R. Martyr, Pershore College of Horticulture, Pershore, Worcestershire.

The introduction of mist propagation has had some strange consequences. It has enabled nurserymen to produce vast quantities of certain types of plants. Camellias, for instance, are now abundant in this country and inevitably prices are coming down. I know of one nursery where one can buy camellias, three feet high and most likely already in bud, for 50s. a plant. The present surplus of camellias has other sides to it than the facility of mist propagation. Camellias must have an acid soil. Also many people have planted camellias and lost them during the first winter. Those who garden on an alkaline soil and who yearn to grow a few camellias can have them if they are prepared to build up beds of acid soil above ground level. This can be done by using old railway sleepers or long logs. Make a bed about three feet deep and fill it with a peaty soil mixture and plant your camellias.

Camellias are plentiful, but there is an insatiable demand for heathers. This is not surprising because they are such excellent weed smotherers and in these days we are all trying to reduce the labour and cost of garden maintenance. There are heathers for acid soils—and all the Erica carnea varieties and hybrids are for either acid or alkaline soils. So if you intend to devote part of your garden to these charming and labour-saving plants it might be worthwhile visiting your nearest shrub nursery, picking out the varieties of your choice and placing the order now.

Since I wrote last week about renovating my lawn by killing the long trailing agrostis grass with paraquat, several readers have written to point out that paraquat is poisonous and querying my wisdom in recommending it. Certainly, there was the tragic death of a young girl through inadvertently drinking concentrated paraquat. But this happened because the product sold in bulk to farmers and market gardeners had been poured into a bottle still carrying the original soft drink label. "Weedol", although based on paraquat, is an entirely different type of product, created specially for garden use and has been approved by the Ministry of Agriculture. It comes in granular form and compared with the concentrated liquid sold to farmers, its paraquat content is small and as it is solid there is no risk of anyone accidentally swallowing a fatal dose. Obviously, as with all chemicals, it should be put out of reach of children and the directions should be followed strictly.

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